

History of Mendocino County Zero Emission Vehicle (ZEV) Plans

By Janet M. Orth, MCOG Deputy Director, 2.3.2020, updated 11.27.2024

In 1996 I went to work for the Mendocino Council of Governments as mid-level administrative staff. I soon learned what an RTPA was and its role in transportation planning. Coming from environmental struggles and offshore oil threats to the California coast through the 1980s when I was a Democratic activist on local, state and national stages, I knew renewable energy was key to solving our problems. Next I had joined with a nonprofit startup promoting renewables and organizing electric vehicle rallies, which continued for many years. So arriving at MCOG, I quickly saw an opportunity.

With the 1996/97 OWP coming up, I wrote a proposal with encouragement of my then-boss Mary Hiatt and a little help from my friends. The idea was to test the new models in a rural setting. All major automakers had a prototype for California's test bed, deployed to urban areas. Most press coverage had been negative on EVs, and we knew we couldn't match Big Oil's PR money. We had to bring the technology to the people, get them in the cars and let them decide the value.

First this proposal had to get past the Technical Advisory Committee. While I gained a couple of early champions there, it took three meetings to get their recommendation. For the third, I brought in my own EV engineer (Bill Warf) as a closer and they ran out of questions. The Phase 1 plan got underway.

For Phase 2, our then state senator Mike Thompson secured a Petroleum Violation Escrow Account grant—the perfect irony—from fines on inflated gas prices during the 1970s energy crisis. We did ride-and-drive events, went into schools, and put planners, engineers and elected officials behind the wheel. In 1999, we reported results for the GM EV1, Toyota RAV4-EV, Ford Ranger EV pickup, Solectria Force EV, and Chrysler EPIC minivan.

What came next is documented in the film *Who Killed the Electric Car*. GM's EV1—our first test car, a little spaceship—was recalled and crushed. ZEVs began to disappear. A dozen years went by, until the tide began to turn. It was time to dust off the old plans. A new movie came out, *Revenge of the Electric Car*, in which the Nissan Leaf and Tesla emerge. The public bailout of GM meant more ZEVs, fewer Hummers.

In 2012 it didn't take much persuasion to fund a study of charging infrastructure needs for our region. Where once we were early adopters and leaders, now it was a scramble to keep up. Our proposals had gone mainstream.

We now had even more stakeholders and advisors. W-Trans was hired to write the Mendocino County ZEV Regional Readiness Plan, identifying a tourism opportunity and a charging corridor gap between urban centers. In 2014, we followed up with a feasibility report by a local consultant, Strategies By Design, who engaged the community and further researched logistics of establishing a public charging network.

Five years later our concept was obsolete as private EV charging networks began to proliferate in California. The plan needed revisiting. With climate instability more widely recognized and even more urgent a crisis, once more I had to compete for a spot in MCOG's program. W-Trans won the contract with an expert team. With our 20-member ZEV Advisory Group (ZAG), they wrote the update, adopted in 2019.

Our plans have supported funding and development of public charging infrastructure throughout Mendocino County. We were invited to join in multi-county readiness planning that addressed alternative transportation fuels for the North State. Along the way, many friends and colleagues have brought us together in a mutual quest.

Epilogue:

In November 2020, I initiated the North State ZEV Working Group to share best practices, knowledge resources, and problem solving to help plan and implement the transition to ZEVs, as recommended in the 2019 Mendocino County ZEV and Alternative Fuels Readiness Plan Update. Members of this committee of the 16-county North State Super Region of transportation planning agencies have convened regularly by teleconference over the past four years. Interest and involvement continues to grow as we meet this moment.

More information:

[NSSR Town Hall 2023 - North State Super Region](#)

[Microsoft PowerPoint - #9 MCOG-CTC Town Hall-Transit & ZEV presentation-Final-jmo](#)

FUNDING

1996/97 Zero Emission Vehicle (ZEV) Demonstration Project – Phase 1:

MCOG allocated \$5,500 in Local Transportation Funds, more than matched with in-kind contributions, for a total feasibility study cost of \$14,250.

1997/98 to 1998/99 Zero Emission Vehicle (ZEV) Demonstration Project – Phase 2:

\$20,000 PVEA grant (California Energy Commission), matched with \$15,000 of Local Transportation Funds, and in-kind contributions of \$26,000, for a total project of \$61,000.

2012/13 Mendocino County Zero Emission Vehicle (ZEV) Regional Readiness Plan:

The Mendocino County Air Quality Management District sponsored the study, MCOG allocated Local Transportation Funds at \$23,000, matched with \$5,000 of State Planning, Programming & Monitoring funds (through Caltrans) in MCOG's planning program, total \$28,000.

2014/15 to 2015/16 ZEV Regional Readiness Plan – Phase 2 Feasibility Report:

\$25,000 grant from State Rural Planning Assistance (Caltrans).

2018/19 Mendocino County ZEV Regional Readiness Plan Update:

MCOG allocated \$54,000 in State Rural Planning Assistance funds.